

Paul Gauguin's Sesquicentennial on Hiva 'Oa, Marquesas—June 7, 1998

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It was a colorful moment for the Father of Colors. The 150th anniversary of the birth of French post-impressionist Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) saw the French government paying eloquent tribute to the famous painter. France flew 65 of Gauguin's European descendants, most of them from Denmark (Gauguin's abandoned wife Mette was Danish), to Pape'ete, Tahiti. Then it wined and dined them in luxury aboard the cruise ship *Paul Gauguin* during the 1,400-kilometer voyage northeast to Hiva 'Oa's main settlement of Atu 'Ona on the Marquesas Islands, Gauguin's last resting place. They were brought to celebrate the painter's sesquicentennial on June 7, 1998. The passengers and crew of the inter-island freighter *Aranui* feted too, along with assorted Marquesan and governmental guests of honor. All Hiva 'Oa delighted in the rare event.



A special stamp featuring Gauguin's "Les Amants" from 1902 was issued on June 7, 1998 by the French Polynesia Postal and Telecommunications Office.

It had rained heavily the day before. But on the special Sunday morning the sun exploded over Hiva 'Oa's towering volcanic peaks to besiege the festivities with those choleric colors that Gauguin so craved and then immortalized. A special Marquesan and French mass hallowed Atu 'Ona's Catholic church, part of it in English for the many international guests. Two hundred Marquesan schoolgirls, enchanting in dark Catho-



At Paul Gauguin's grave with the Gauguin family.

lic uniforms, graced both naves. The impassioned singing, in Marquesan and Tahitian, was exaltingly felicitous, reverberating through the high hall as only Polynesian song-prayer can.

Some eighty descendants and other devotees then suffered green, mud-splattered all-purpose *les trucks* up to Atu 'Ona's orchard-like graveyard on the eastern hill to pay their respects to Paul Gauguin himself. Visibly moved Gauguin family members braved a few ardent words in English. Clovis Gauguin of Denmark, with broken voice, chanted a passionate poem he had



Gauguin's grave, Hiva 'Oa, on his sesquicentennial, June 7, 1998.

composed especially for this celebration of his great-grandfather, also in English (see "An Ode to Paul Gauguin" below).

The sun was relentless. The Marquesan colors burned brightly. Many sought shade. More than one cynic was heard to grunt at the fundamental irony of the passion play: that those praising Gauguin the loudest were those whose family had also suffered the worst from Gauguin's callous abandonment. It had meant the family's ruin.

"And where are the Tahitian Gauguins' this day? Eh?"

Joyful feasting followed, solemnized in a large U-shaped



Marquesan dancers on the *tohua* of Atu 'Ona. The Marquesan pig-dance was the hit of the day.

linkage of thatched benches down on the *tohua*, the ancient ceremonial courtyard in the center of Atu 'Ona. Over one hundred foreigners and five times the number of Marquesans were charmed with roast pork and chicken, sweet potatoes, *poi*, raw fish salad, fried bananas, and much more, quenching their thirst on coconut milk straight from the nut. It rained suddenly but then the sun burst out again and drums filled the *tohua*—three large *pahu* and one little *tutu*—and grass-skirted and aproned youths and girls performed vivacious dances in a motley mixture of Tahitian, Maori and Hawaiian styles.

Suddenly, loud excited laughter greeted the animated Marquesan pig-dance of the young men. A dignified formal performance by the dance master, sheer art in motion, concluded the entertainment. It has been a celebration by the Marquesans



Alongside the *tohua*, Gauguin's descendents gather around to plant a commemorative tree.

for one of their own, and the hundreds of Marquesans in attendance seemed to show more delight than the perhaps less discerning guests from abroad.

At one in the afternoon, official speeches introduced an

almost embarrassing formal European antithesis at the foot of the modern reconstruction of Gauguin's two-story atelier just alongside the *tohua*. A tree was planted by Gauguin's descendants to honor the occasion. A representative of the University of Pennsylvania presented the Atu 'Ona's mayor a special arts award for the town museum. Many then toured the Gauguin atelier. Happily, another young Marquesan dance troupe began "pigging" on the *tohua*, this time even more ribald and hilarious than before. Marquesan girls roared with laughter.

It began to drizzle lightly when the hundreds started drifting off, some to the next valley, others to the other side of the planet.

But then the sun came out quite suddenly again, and the world exploded in those familiar lascivious colors.

Gauguin would have laughed the loudest.

AN ODE TO PAUL GAUGUIN

by Clovis Gauguin

Here you lie, buried in the soil
Under the sun and the stars of the Southern sky
With a view of the landscape you painted
So far away from where your journey started
Your mind and your hands brought you here
On your way, seeking the innocent world to paint.

Your soul was a burning flame
The colors were your guiding stars
Through the storms of your life
Your palette was a shield
Against the scornful laughter
When the world woke up to realize
That the art of painting had changed totally.

The seeds you planted have now grown up
And you have become a myth to the world
Still living and breathing through your pictures
In the halls of the famous
Next to your friends
Who suffered and fought the same struggle
And paid the price for seeking and opening new doors
And giving new eyes to the world.

I might be a stranger right here
But I am one of the seeds you planted long ago
And far from here.

Today returning with your family
To pay our respects to you
In the place where your eyes
Caught the last glimpse of the light
And the colors you made immortal.

(Recorded as delivered by the author Clovis Gauguin on June 7, 1998, at the grave of Paul Gauguin, Atu 'Ona, Hiva 'Oa, Marquesas Islands, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the artist's birth).

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